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The Persian Gulf and Siraf in works by Muslim Cartographers*

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Abstract

The object of this paper is to demonstrate that the Persian Gulf or the Persian Sea, as it was occasionally called, was a well established waterway known practically to all geographers and historians of the Muslim as well as the classical world. Siraf was an all important port also identified in early manuscripts and maps of the Persian Gulf. Although early Muslim cartographers did not have the proper skills for presenting an accurate portrayal of the Persian Gulf and its adjacent towns, yet Siraf appears in most maps of Muslim geographers well after its devastation in the late 10th century CE.

Although the migration of the Arabs to the southern shores of the Persian Gulf began from the second century of the Christian calendar, Iranian domination in the southern regions of the Persian Gulf achieved a more profound status during the Sasanian dynasty (ca. 224-642 CE). The political rivalries of the two main powers, the Romans and the Persians in the northern end of the Persian Gulf, extended the Iranian borders deep into the Mesopotamian hinterlands. In this region, the Sasanians established their governments by creating Hira (al-Hira) or Monazereh in the northern and central regions of

present day Iraq. This was intended to serve as a protective political wall against the Roman pressure. As a geo-strategic response to the Persian forces, the Romans created the frontier government of Ghassan in the region corresponding to the present day Syria in order to neutralize Persia.

In the Strait of Hormuz, "Mazundum" or "Masundum" means the place of entry into "Masun." Currently this name is referred to as Musnadam and is the place of entry into Masun, Oman from within Iran. Oman also existed in the form of Omana and the present day port of Suhar was the name frequently used in the past with reference to the region. Arab migrations from the Arabian Peninsula and from Yemen towards the coastal areas of the Persian Gulf were common, as was the migration from within Iran towards the southern coasts. It was on this basis that Arab geographers of the Islamic period like other geographers named the sea that separated Iran from the mass lands of the Arabian Peninsula as the "Sea of Pars" or the "Persian Gulf."¹

Early historians and geographers of the Arab and Islamic world such as Tabari, Masudi and Yaqubi claimed that the entire Persian Gulf belonged to the ancient Iranian world. Abul Qassem Muhammad bin Hawqal al-Bagdadi known as Ibn Hawqal in his invaluable work entitled *Surat al-Ardh*, completed



in 977. CE/367 A.H, refers to the Persian Gulf in the following words:

As stated numerous times, the Pars Sea is a gulf which separates from an ocean adjacent to the world) near China and the land of "Waq" and it is that sea which extends from the lands of Sind, Kerman and Pars and from all of the lands it is known as Pars. There is no sea that compares to this and which is more advanced than the Sea of Pars. The reason is that the kings of Pars from ancient times have exerted immense control over the territory and even now they continue to exert the most control on distant and near lands to this Sea.²

Like the pre-Islamic period, the mass land of the southern shores of the Persian Gulf was divided into two sections: Oman (Mason-e Peshin) and Bahrain (Hagar-e Peshin). Both names of the Sea of Fars and the Persian Gulf were common in the historical and geographical works of the Islamic period. The Arab and Muslim geographers like their predecessors, the pre-Islamic Iranians sometimes called the sea between the Iranian plateau and the Arabian Peninsula as the sea of Fars and occasionally, imitating the ancient Greeks they referred to it as the Persian Gulf.

On the other hand, the theory held by the ancient Iranian geographers that the world was divided by two seas is discussed in detail in the works of Islamic geographers. Among early Muslim geographers, the argument that a dual sea divided the internal waters of the world was discussed in depth and these two seas were presented as the Sea of Pars and the Roman Sea (i.e. the Mediterranean).

Suhrah, a Muslim writer of the 3rd/9th century in his *Ajayeab al-Aqalim al-Sab'at ela Nahayat al-'Amarat* presented the south (eastern) waters of the world as the "Sea of Fars, and as *al-Bahr al-Junubi al-Kabir* (the southern great sea)." In other words, the Sea of Fars corresponded to the same huge southern (eastern) sea frequently mentioned. During this period, other Muslim and Arab geographers, called the sea in the south as the Persian Gulf. For instance Abu Ali Ahmad bin Umar bin Rasteh in his *Kitab al-'Alaq al-Nafiseh* (290 A.H.) mentioned "a branch of the Indian sea in the direction of Fars called the Persian Gulf."

The term "Persian Gulf" is frequently employed in most of the geographical works of the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th centuries of Islam, corresponding to the 9th to 12th centuries CE. In these writings the theory of a dual structure of the inland waters of the earth continued to prevail. The large eastern sea was still called the



Sea of Fars. In Istakhari's *al-Masalik va al-Mamalek* it is stated that "the largest sea is the sea of Pars and the Roman sea... both originate from the adjacent seas near the edge of the world and the length and width of the Sea of Fars is more significant, and beyond the end of this sea lies the land of China."³ In Ibn Hawqal's *Surat al-Ardh* the sea of Fars is assumed to include all the seas which circle the Islamic lands.⁴

Abu Reyhan Biruni is perhaps the first geographer of the Islamic world who in his *al-Tafhim* and the *Qanun al-Masudi* dismissed the theory of the extent of the sea of Fars and limited the sea of Fars to the sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf. In his *al-Tafhim*, Abu Reyhan frequently made use of both the sea of Fars and the Persian Gulf. Biruni's geographical definition of the Persian Gulf served as an accepted definition for several centuries hence.

In the 4th century of Islam (10th century) Persians were able to annex the southern regions of the Persian Gulf to their own territories. Ahmad Mu'izz-ud-Dawla Dylami (945 CE/334 A.H.) began to conquer the Mesopotamian region and the southern territories of the Persian Gulf. His nephew, 'Azad-ud-Dawla Dylami (978 CE/367 A.H.) was able to exert Iran's sovereignty over the entire southern region of the Persian Gulf.

From this period the migration of Iranians to the southern regions of the Persian Gulf was revitalized once again.

During this period coastal regions and the islands on the northern end of the Persian Gulf acquired distinct fame and reputation, locations such as Siraf or Shirab (near present port of Taheri), Abarkafan or Laft (present day Qishm), Abrun (modern Hindurabi), Abu Shahr (modern Bushehr), Miyanrudan or Abadan (modern Abadan), Janabeh (modern Ganaveh), Durdur (near present Abadan), Duraq or Duraqestan (present Shadegan), Mahrezeh (near Abadan), and Hormuz (modern Bandar Abbas). Ship building and sailing by Iranians in the southern waters of the Persian Gulf was again revitalized significantly. In this regard, Ibn Hawqal in his *Surat al-Ardh* is noted to have said that: "Ships from different regions that safely manage to traverse the oceans and return home with pomp and immunity are those belonging to Pars."⁵

Iranian sovereignty over the southern regions of the Pars Sea encountered difficulties throughout the Islamic centuries and local groups emerged in different parts of Iran and each managed to impose its sovereignty for a brief period of time. It was at the peak of the Safavid power (1502-1723 CE/907-1135 A.H.) that Shah Abbas managed to expel the Portuguese from



Bahrain and the Persian Gulf in 1603 CE/1011 A.H., and was able to return the entire southern coastal areas of the Persian Gulf under Iranian control. This situation prevailed until the death of Nadir Shah in the summer of 1747 CE/1160 A.H.

Though Iranian authority and control over the southern regions of the Persian Gulf prior to the Islamic period was clear and well defined, during the Islamic dominance, particularly between the 11th to 14th centuries of the Islamic calendar (16th to 20th centuries CE) this authority was vague and uncertain. While autonomous tribes of the southern littoral of the Persian Gulf continued to maintain their political affiliations with Oman or Muscat, the governments of Oman and Muscat would enter into bilateral agreements with the Qajar government and would rent sections of the northern littoral coast of the Persian Gulf from Iran and would use the Iranian territories to launch an occasional attack against Bahrain and other settlers on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf. This tenuous relationship between Iran and Oman often prepared the way for autonomous tribes of the region as well as the British to take advantage of the area and to pursue their own interests in a region that often seemed to resemble a no man's territory.

Collective immigration of Iranians to the southern regions of the Persian Gulf in the Islamic centuries continued. Groups settling in that region managed to adapt themselves to the environment and gradually transformed into nomadic tribes who spoke in native Arabic. Among these Arabic speaking tribes were the Bani Khamareh, Al-e Bumahar, Al-e Ali and Bani Havaleh.

From the 13th CE/7th A.H. century onward, geographical descriptions of the earth tended to correspond somewhat accurately with the real world. Also, at about approximately the same time we notice an increase in the use of the Persian Gulf in the prevailing geographical works

The expression Bahr-e Fars (Persian Sea) was also employed in the various sources until the 20th century and occasionally both names were used simultaneously. For instance Mustafa bin Abdullah the famous Katib Chelebi of Constantinople who was often referred to as Hajji Kalifeh (died 1657 CE/1067 A.H.) mentions in his Turkish work entitled *Jahanuma* that "The Persian Sea is called Sinus Persicus which means the Persian Gulf because of the location of Pars on its eastern end. It is also called Mare Persicum, or the Pars Sea."⁶ The manuscripts of the first version of Katib Chelebi's *Jahanuma* have in the margins finely sketched maps. In 1732 CE/1145 A.H. version of the



same work, full-paged maps, obviously in the style of contemporary European cartography are provided, but with inverse orientation, that is north is provided at the bottom of the manuscript.

As the geographical limits for the name of Bahr-e Pars narrowed itself in the works of geographers after 13th CE/ 7th A.H. century, the geographical name of the Indian Sea acquired a broader use until gradually the Persian sea came to be regarded as an extension of the Indian sea. The Italian Muslim geographer, Sharif al-Edrisi who belonged to Sicily in his *Nuzhat al-Moshtagh* (1165 CE/560 A.H.) mentions the Indian and the Chinese seas as the "green Chinese sea," and regards the Persian sea as an extension of the sea of China. In the description of geographical locations he faithfully follows Ibn Rasteh. Apparently, Ibn Rasteh in *al-'Alaq al-Nafiseh* (903 CE /290 A.H.) mentions that "from the sea of Hind, a gulf separates itself towards the lands of Fars which is called the Persian Gulf."⁷

Half a century after Sharif al-Edrisi, Yaqut Hamavi Rumi who was also from Italian decent, in his *Mu'jam al-Buldan* mentions the sea of Fars. From 14th/8th century until the present day, the southern sea of Iran in both Arabic and Islamic sources has been

identified as the "Sea of Fars" or the "Persian Gulf." Zakariya Qazvini (d.1284 CE/682 A.H.) in his work entitled *Asar al-Bilad va Akhbar al-Abad* mentions the Sea of Fars.⁸ However, in a map provided in the same text the sea to the south of Iran is referred to as the "Persian Gulf."

Shams al-Din al-Damashqi (d. 1327/727) also mentions the Sea of Pars as well as the Persian Gulf in his *Nukhbat al-Dahr fi 'Ajayeb al-Bar va al-Bahr*.⁹ Also, Ibn al-Wardi (d. 1349 CE/749 A.H.) in his *Kharidat al-'Ajayeb va Faridat al-Qarayeb* repeatedly mentions the Bahr al-Fars or the Sea of Fars.

In his Persian work entitled *Nuzhat al-Qulub* Hamdullah Mustufi (d. 1340 A.D. /740 A.H.) also makes references to the Persian sea while Ahmad Ibn-i Abdullah al-Ghalghashandi (d. 1418 CE/821 A.H.) in his study entitled *Subhi al-Asha'* has used the term Bahr Fars. Likewise, the Arabic dictionary of *al-Bastani* published in Beirut (1883 CE) made frequent use of the term Persian Gulf.

A few geographical works belonging to the Islamic period have occasionally employed uncommon names such as "Bahr al-Ajam," "Hormuz Sea," "Basra Gulf," etc. However, these were used only in rare and unusual circumstances.



The period of Muslim cartography can be approximately dated between 8th to 15th CE/3rd to 10th centuries A.H. The earliest available maps belonging to this period are translations of Ptolemy's Atlas into Arabic. During this period numerous maps have been preserved from Muslim mathematicians, geographers and cartographers. Early mention of "Bahr al-Fars" appear in works by Kindi (801-873 CE/185-260 A.H), Khurdadba (826-913 CE/211-300 A.H), and Masudi (897-964 CE/284-353 A.H). However, none is more attractive and distinct than the map of the Persian Gulf prepared by Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Nasr "Jayhani" about 922 CE/310 A.H. who presents the ports and islands of the Persian Gulf including Siraf, Hormuz, Abadan, Bahrain etc. with particular clarity. What make the map more attractive are the sketches of Adam, the Island of Sarandib and Kan Yaqut, fishes and whales. Jayhani, like other geographers of his time, regarded the Indian, Chinese and the Red seas as an enclosed waterway and a mere extension of the Persian Gulf.

Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Farsi known as Istakhari (ca. prior to 930-957 CE/318-346 A.H.) in his remarkable manuscripts entitled *Surat al-Eqlim* and *al-Masalik va al-Mamalik* has also provided us with various maps of the Persian Gulf. These maps are

available to us through different translations of Istakhari into Persian, Arabic and Turkish. Istakhari quotes Abu Zayd Balkhi in his *Masalik va al-Mamalik* as follows:

The Sea of Pars is a gulf from the ocean (i.e. outer world) extending to China, Sumatra and India. They call it Pars and Kerman for there is no place as cultivated as these on this sea and in the past the kings of Pars were greater and stronger while today it is from the shores of Pars that the people are dispersed elsewhere.¹⁰

The historian and geographer of the 4th century A.H., Ibn Hawqal, in his *Surat al-Ardh* wrote:

I have repeatedly said that the Sea of Pars is a gulf from the ocean (i.e. outer world) from China and near Sumatra and this sea extends from Sind and Kerman to Fars and among other countries it is known as Fars since Fars is the most developed of these countries and the kings of these territories in the past had significant authority and presently they exert their hold over all the shores, both near and far. Ships that traverse the sea of Fars, move far away from their own lands and then return with pride and in complete safety, all belong to Fars.¹¹



Following Ibn Hawqal, the limits of the Persian Gulf gradually changed in the works of cartographers and geographers and sections of that became known as the Indian sea and the Red Sea (Arab Sea) both as separate seas, and gradually a more precise limit of the Persian Gulf became apparent, so much so that in 966 CE/355 A.H. for the first time in the dictionary *al-Badeh va al-Tarikh* of Tahir al-Maqddisi which was written for one of the viziers of the Samanians (819-1005 CE/ 204-395 A.H.), we encounter the name of al-Khalej al-Farsi.

Shams al-Din Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Abu Bakr al-Maqddisi (946-1000 CE/335-390 A.H.) in his world maps that include Iraq, mentions the Sea of Fars. Copies of these maps are available in the Aya Sophia and the Berlin Libraries. In addition, maps of the world belonging to Abu al-Hasan Ali bin Yunes al-Sadafi known as Ibn Yunes (950-1009 CE/339-400 A.H.) were discovered and recreated by the Polish scholar Jochaim Lelewel in 1850 CE/1267 A.H and were published in book form entitled *Geography of the Medieval Ages*. Abu Reyhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Biruni (973-1048 CE/362-440 A.H.) known as Abu Reyhan Biruni, includes the maps of the "seven seas" and the Sea of Fars in his *al-Tafhim*.

Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahamd bin Yusef al-Katib Kharazmi (ca. 975-991 CE/365-381 A.H.) presented the Sea of Fars in a complete map of the Persian Gulf and in his world atlas. His maps, in manuscript form, are to be found in Istanbul, in the Koshak (Kosk) Library of Sultan Ahmad.

Abu al-Ishaq bin Yahya al-Naqash ibn al-Zarqaleh known as "Zarqali" (1029-1087 CE/420-480 A.H.) has made references to the Sea of Fars. Also al-Sheikh Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Edrisi al-Hussaini al-Tallebi known as "Edrisi" (1000-1600 CE/493-555 A.H.) in maps collected and published by Konrad Miller and known as "the world map of Edrisi, mentioned the Sea of Fars and identified the major islands and cities such as Khark, Bahrain, Hormuz, Seraf, 'Abadan, etc.

In another manuscript belonging to the Herogliche Bibliothek, under the name of Abu Ali al-Farsi al-Nahvi (ca. 1172 CE/569 A.H.) a complete and an independent map of the Persian Gulf is to be found (no. 1521) under the title "Surat al-Bahr al-Fars". Among other information, this map includes the names of islands, ports and cities of the Persian Gulf.



Suwar al-Aqalim provides us with another manuscript belonging to Muhammad ibn Muhammad bin al-Hussain al-Tusi, better known as Khajeh Nasir al-Din Tusi. This is presently available in the National Library of Vienna. The manuscript clearly illustrates the Sea of Pars with its various islands and ports.

Abu Abdullah Zakari Muhammad bin Mahmud al-Qazvini (1203-1283 CE/600-682 A.H.) in *al-Aqalim* and *Asar al-Balad va Akhbar al-'Ebad* has repeatedly mentioned the name of the Persian Gulf. Manuscripts of his work are to be found in the Leiden University Library, the British Museum and the Hurzogliche Bibliothek in Gotha. Also, Wustenfled and Miller have reconstructed and published the Qazvini maps in a presentable form.

A manuscript of the Persian Gulf by Abul Hasan Ali Qarmati al-Maghribi known as Ibn Sa'id (1214-1286 CE /610-685 A.H.) is available at the Bibliotheque National (registration no. 2214) in Paris. Belonging to the 12th and 13th centuries, maps of the Persian Gulf are also available from Yaqut Hamavi (1179-1229 CE/576-626 A.H.) and Mathew Paris (ca. 1195-1259 CE/592-657 A.H.), while both Gervase of Tilbury (ca. 555-608 CE/A.D.1160-1211) in the world map of Ebstorf and Gullaume

of Tubruquis (1220-1293 CE/617-692 A.H.) illustrate the Persian Gulf in a larger map of the world.

Ismail bin Ali bin Muhammad bin Umar bin Shahanshah bin Ayub 'Imaddudin, known as Abu al-Fada' (1273-1331 CE/672-732 A.H.) and Hamdullah Mustufi (1281-1349 CE/680-750 A.H.) in maps presented in *Nuzhat al-Qulub* introduced the Sea of Far. Numerous manuscripts of the latter are available at the Oxford Library and the British Museum. Konrad Miller, in his collection of Arabic maps published in Stuttgart in 1931 presents several samples of Mustufi's maps as part of his collection.

In different maps of the world, Saraj al-Din Abu Hifz Umr ibn al-Vardi (1313-1371 CE/713-773 A.H.) mentioned the Sea of Fars and "khalej al-Farsi" copies of which are now available in Berlin, Paris and the Bodlean at Oxford. Also Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 CE/732-808 A.H.) made frequent use of the Sea of Fars along with an Egyptian astrologer and geographer (ca. 1332 CE/832 A.H.) Ahmad bin Hamadan bin "Shabib Harrani," who presented the Sea of Fars in the sketch of his world map. A manuscript of his work is to be found at the Herzliche Bibliothek in Gotha, registered as no. 1513.



From the works of Shahab al-Din Abdullah Lutfullah Khavafi, the Iranian historian and geographer of the Timurid period known as "Hafez Abru" (d. 1430 CE/ 833 A.H.) have numerous maps of the world in his *al-Masalik al-Mamalik*. A copy of this map is available at the British Museum in London (no. 16736). However, no independent map of the Persian Gulf is at our disposal. In his work Krachkovskii, the Russian cartographer, mentioned two maps of the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf by Hafez Abru. Non-Muslim and western geographers such as Richard of Haldingham (1285 CE/684 A.H.), Petrus Vesconte (ca. 1320 CE/720 A.H.) and Randulf Higden (1299-1363 CE/699-765 A.H.) both in their continental and world maps mention the Persian Gulf. These maps are to be readily found in the National Libraries in Berlin, Paris and London.

With the advent of the Renaissance in the early 16th century, the science of cartography improved significantly. However, by then Siraf had practically disappeared from all maps of the Persian Gulf. This goes to show that since the big earthquake that devastated practically the entire Port of Siraf and its vicinity in the late 10th century CE, it was no longer able to elevate itself to its previous position of distinction.

References and Notes

* This article is partially based on a forthcoming joint study by Shahab, Kamali, Vatandoust, et. al., entitled *Persian Gulf: In Old and Historical Maps*.

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